

**Time for Action:**  
**The National Council's Plan for Australia to  
Reduce Violence against Women and their  
Children**  
**2009–2021**

**A SUMMARY**

## THE NATIONAL COUNCIL TO REDUCE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND THEIR CHILDREN

'As a nation, the time has well and truly come to have a national conversation - a public national conversation, not a private one - about how it could still be the case that in 2008 so many Australian women could have experienced violence ...

It is my gender - it is our gender - Australian men - that are responsible. And so the question is: what are we going to do about it?'

The Hon. Kevin Rudd MP  
Prime Minister of Australia, 2008

In May 2008 the Prime Minister, the Hon. Kevin Rudd MP, and the Minister for the Status of Women, the Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP, announced the establishment of an eleven-member National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (the Council). They asked the Council to lead a public national conversation and produce a National Plan of Action to reduce the incidence and impact of domestic and family violence and sexual assault.

In developing *Time for Action: the National Council's Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2009-2021* (the Plan of Action), Council members consulted more than 2,000 Australians. This involved meetings in every State and Territory, expert round-table discussions, the receipt of hundreds of formal written submissions, and interviews with both victims and perpetrators of domestic and family violence and sexual assault. The Council drew from the available evidence and undertook research to identify current responses to violence against women across the country, commissioned a comparison of State and Territory domestic violence and sexual assault laws, and drew on an analysis of the national costs of violence projected to 2021. In writing the Plan of Action, the Council also invited people with a variety of expertise to act as 'critical friends' and provide feedback on the draft plan.

The Council recognises and thanks all the consultation participants, researchers, academics, service providers, policy makers, victims of violence and others who were committed to sharing their experiences and knowledge, and contributing to this agenda for change.

The outcome of the Council's national conversation on this pressing need to address violence against women and their children is summarised in this document.

For a copy of *Time for Action: The National Council's Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2009–2021*, and associated documents,

- go to [http://www.ofw.fahcsia.gov.au/reducing\\_violence/national\\_plan/index.htm](http://www.ofw.fahcsia.gov.au/reducing_violence/national_plan/index.htm)
- or call 1300 764 656

## **THE CONTEXT FOR THE PLAN OF ACTION**

Violence against women is a fundamental breach of human rights, and sexual assault and domestic and family violence are the most pervasive forms of violence against women in this country. They have serious consequences for individual women, their children, their extended families, their communities, and the nation as a whole.

While both women and men can be perpetrators and victims of violence, research shows that the overwhelming majority of sexual and domestic and family violence is perpetrated by men against women.

### **Causes, nature and prevalence of violence against women**

Violence against women stems from a complex interaction of many factors at the individual, relationship, community and societal levels. Many of these factors are linked to social and economic inequality between men and women. This includes gender differences in power, which contribute to controlling attitudes and behaviours. Social and geographic isolation, and alcohol, are also major contributors to violence against women.

Women are mostly assaulted by men they know, often in their own homes, and in circumstances where they are likely to be subject to repeated assaults over time. Violence against women knows no geographical, socio-economic, age, ability, cultural or religious boundaries. There are circumstances, however, that put some women at greater risk of sexual assault and domestic and family violence, and which require specifically tailored responses.

Sexual violence affects at least one in five Australian women and physical violence affects at least one in three Australian women, at some time during their life.

### **Consequences of violence against women**

Violence against women has many consequences and has serious implications for, and beyond, the individual woman subjected to violence. Violence against women limits victims' capacity to fully participate in society, the political system and the economy. It is a significant cause of homelessness among women; it has extreme consequences for women's physical and mental health and wellbeing, and that of their children; and it can result in premature death, including homicide.

Violence against women also carries an enormous economic cost to the nation. Previous research has estimated that the economic costs of sexual violence, for crisis intervention alone, total more than \$230 million; and that violence against women by their partners costs Australia \$8.1 billion each year. Recent research indicates that, without substantial and sustained preventive action, intimate-partner violence against women will cost the Australian economy around \$15.6 billion in 2021-22.

If the implementation of this National Plan resulted in an average reduction in violence against women and their children of just 10 per cent by 2021–22, some \$1.6 billion in economic costs to victims/survivors, their friends and families, perpetrators, children, employers, governments and the community, could be avoided.

### **Current responses to violence against women in Australia**

Against a background of international developments, and as a signatory to the *United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (1979)* and the *United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1994)*, Australia has

seen decades of reform to sexual assault and domestic and family violence policy and legislation. Driven largely by advocates committed to equality and justice for women, these efforts have resulted in substantial and positive changes in our nation's efforts to stop violence against women. Much more needs to be done however, and in some aspects, done differently.

Despite the wide ranging and devastating effects of violence against women, funding levels for programs and services targeting the needs of women and their children who have experienced violence are inadequate. Budgetary allocations must match the level of investment needed to reduce the incidence of violence against women and their children, minimise the impacts for those who are subjected to violence through effective service provision, and address the economic costs.

Other systemic factors further limit the capacity to respond effectively to violence against women and their children. These factors include: gaps between policy and legislative intent and their implementation; under-development of evidence-based strategies for rehabilitation of perpetrators; and inadequate coordination of systems for planning, resource allocation and service delivery.

## **THE NATIONAL COUNCIL'S PLAN OF ACTION**

The Plan of Action outlines a vision, based on evidence and a set of core values and principles. It includes recommendations on ways to manage and progress the Plan, and it separately recommends actions to reduce violence against women and their children.

The Council recognises that there can be no 'one-size fits all' approach to addressing violence against women. Getting the balance right between joined-up and consistent programs and services and the need for tailored responses, is crucial to meeting the specific circumstances of individual women, in all their diversity.

The Council has kept the experiences and needs of women and their children at the heart of the Plan of Action, and has structured its vision, values, principles and outcomes to recognise:

- what women want, and have a right to, is that their community is free from violence so that they can live in safety with respectful and strong relationships;
- a woman at risk of, or experiencing, violence should have access to easily-identified, appropriate and high-quality services;
- if a woman needs help through the legal system, it must treat her with dignity and hold the perpetrator accountable for his behaviour;
- perpetrators must accept responsibility for changing their behaviour and participate in effective programs to ensure their violence is not repeated; and
- achieving these goals hinges on the entire system joining seamlessly, with all the parts working together, to assure women and their children that they will be safe and free from violence.

The Plan of Action also draws on work in recent decades to capture the nature, scope and consequences of violence against women, and to document and measure the effects of the systems, policies and practices that seek to address it.

## **Key features**

Key features of the Plan of Action include:

- the recognition that everyone in the community is responsible for reducing these forms of violence;
- a commitment to supporting women affected by violence and their children;
- a focus on the perpetrators of violence, and ways in which they can be part of a solution;
- addressing prevention in a way that goes beyond the message of “stop violence” to teaching children how to develop respectful relationships throughout their lifetime;
- ensuring that responses to violence are just;
- using a strong evidence-base;
- setting a long-term vision and direction for responding to this complex social issue, and seeking bi-partisan support for reducing violence which ensures women, children and our communities are safe;
- the recognition of the need for long-term commitment and sustained investment from all levels of government.

## **Vision**

The Council's vision for Australia is that:

*Women and their children live free from violence, within respectful relationships and in safe communities.*

## **Values and principles**

The Plan of Action is founded on seven core values and supporting principles -

### **We value safety**

- All women and children have the right to safe and respectful relationships and to live free from violence.
- Violence against women and their children is wrong. It is a fundamental breach of human rights.
- The safety of women and their children who have experienced, or are experiencing, violence is paramount in any response.
- No law, policy or practice should jeopardise the safety or well-being of women and their children.

### **We value community responsibility**

- The whole community is responsible for condemning and eliminating violence against women and their children.

- Preventing violence by developing a culture of respect must be a high priority for the community.
- The community has a responsibility to hold perpetrators of violence accountable, and to help them stop their violence.

### ***We value equality and diversity***

- Under Australian law, women and men have equal rights. Political, economic and social factors that create an imbalance between the genders must be addressed.
- Responses to violence against women and their children must recognise and address the unequal power relations and gender inequality that authorises violence; and recognise and address other factors such as race, class, age, sexuality, ethnicity and disability that intersect with gender to shape women's experience of violence.
- Actions, policies and practices must be examined for unintended consequences, such as gender discrimination, and deliver real equality for women and their children.
- Policies and programs that increase women's independence, including their financial independence, are integral to achieving gender equality.
- Any disadvantage arising as a consequence of the way in which diversity is understood and/or applied must be redressed.
- Initiatives to prevent or respond to violence must demonstrate that they adopt an intersectional framework which ensures all barriers to accessing services by women and their children, in all their diversity, have been eliminated. This should be a prerequisite for achieving recognition as a policy, program or practice of high standard.

### ***We value responsiveness***

- Governments must be responsible for ensuring that the service system for responding to violence against women and their children is adequately resourced and is well-coordinated and supported, so that every level of response will work efficiently and effectively.
- Appropriate and effective services must be available to victims/survivors and perpetrators in a timely manner, wherever they live.
- Service system responses to violence against women and their children must take account of differences among women.
- Integrated and coordinated responses to violence must draw on a range of specialist and mainstream services.
- Early intervention is essential to minimise the level and effects of violence against women and their children.

### ***We value justice***

- Victims/survivors and perpetrators must have access to processes and outcomes that are fair and just.

- Victims/survivors must have access to appropriate legal responses that enhance safety and uphold individuals' rights.
- Perpetrators of violence must be held accountable, and accept responsibility for their actions. They must acknowledge the consequences of their behaviour, and be challenged and supported to stop their violent behaviour.
- Civil and criminal justice systems must acknowledge the unequal circumstances and contexts within which violence takes place, and this must be reflected in delivering just outcomes for victims/survivors and perpetrators.

### ***We value durability***

- Government commitments and investments must be made for the long-term.
- For durable change to take place, governments cannot do it all.
- Durable change must be built on community participation, ownership, and responsibility for, the problems, processes and outcomes.
- Durability requires community planning that does not foster local competition.
- Developing the capacity to engage genuinely and openly with communities, encouraging their active participation in determining the new future, is the challenge for all.

### ***We value knowledge and accountability***

- Research evidence and practice wisdom must inform the development of approaches and delivery of responses to violence against women and their children.
- Evaluation and appropriate outcome measures must be built into all program designs and funding plans from the outset.
- Policy, legislation and practices must be monitored and evaluated to ensure that they are effective in preventing violence against women and their children, and in contributing to the knowledge base.
- The evidence base must be continually reviewed and strengthened, knowledge disseminated and opportunities for innovation promoted.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT**

The Council's recommendations to the Australian Government focus on the ways the National Council's Plan of Action should be recognised and implemented, taking account of the governance arrangements and commitments needed to deliver results.

### ***Vision and commitment***

#### ***Recommendation 1***

That the Australian Government commit to a vision for Australia where "*women and their children live free from violence, within respectful relationships, and in safe communities*".

#### ***Recommendation 2***

That the Australian Government support the realisation of this vision for Australia's women and children through a long-term, strategic and sustained commitment.

- This commitment would be effected through a series of three-year implementation plans to 2021 to be developed in partnership with government, business and the community, built on research and evaluation, and that will incorporate the outcomes of measures already implemented.

### ***Clear outcomes, strategies and actions***

#### ***Recommendation 3***

That the Australian Government agree that realising this vision requires that:

- Communities are safe and free from violence
- Relationships are respectful
- Services meet the needs of women and their children
- Responses are just
- Perpetrators stop their violence
- Systems work together effectively.

#### ***Recommendation 4***

That the Australian Government accept that the strategies developed by Council under the six outcomes are based on research, best practice, and community feedback; and that these strategies must underpin any effective response. The Government should also acknowledge that these strategies alone may be insufficient, and that new strategies may be required over time.

#### ***Recommendation 5***

That the Australian Government note that the Council has identified a set of actions for the next 12 years aimed at achieving the Plan of Action's outcomes and executing its strategies, and agree to:

- urgently implement the priority actions that the Council considers represent the minimum investment to effect change;

- start work on the other early actions identified in the first three-year Implementation Plan;
- review all actions in developing the second and subsequent three-year Implementation Plans.

### ***A national response through the Council of Australian Governments***

#### ***Recommendation 6***

That the Australian Government recognise the critical role of State and Territory Governments in reducing violence against women and their children; that it refer the Plan of Action to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG); and request that COAG develop an integrated, comprehensive response endorsed by all levels of government by early 2010.

#### ***Recommendation 7***

That the Australian Government acknowledge the social and economic costs of inaction; and that it encourage Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers and agencies to take action consistent with the Plan of Action's outcomes in advance of the integrated, comprehensive response being developed by COAG.

#### ***Recommendation 8***

That, following referral to COAG, the Australian Government pursue the development of a whole-of-government approach that:

- builds on the vision, outcomes, strategies and actions identified by the Council;
- aligns all Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments' plans, policies, procedures, and practices with those agreed to by COAG;
- includes a robust system of regular reporting, independent monitoring, and comprehensive independent evaluations that will develop a strong evidence base to measure the impacts and outcomes of actions.

#### ***Recommendation 9***

That the Australian Government work with State and Territory Governments through COAG to ensure the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children meets the needs of children who witness and experience domestic and family violence.

### ***Continued community engagement on action***

#### ***Recommendation 10***

That the Australian Government recognise the critical need to provide a multi-layered, phased, and cohesive approach to public awareness and discussion about violence prevention and behavioural change over the Plan of Action's lifetime; and agree that the Commonwealth Minister for the Status of Women will lead the development of a social marketing strategy in partnership with State and Territory Governments and the community.

#### ***Recommendation 11***

That the Australian Government accept the vital role of the community in helping reduce violence against women and their children, and agree to:

- work in partnership with other levels of government, business, and the community sector;

- provide opportunities for individuals, business, community, and other institutions;
- build bi-partisan support at the federal, state, territory, and local government levels to support the broad directions advocated in the Plan of Action;
- extend the role of the Council, or similar body, to one of helping to implement the Plan of Action.

## **OUTCOMES, STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS**

To achieve the vision, the Plan of Action focuses on six required outcomes, to be achieved through 25 strategies and 117 actions. While strategies and actions for all six outcomes are built on the available evidence, the plan also identifies and responds to areas needing further development, and more rigorous evidence in each outcome area.

The National Council's Plan of Action to achieve these outcomes incorporates developing, implementing, and reviewing, a series of three-year Implementation Plans. These implementation plans provide the timeframe for delivering specific actions, and the National Council envisages these Implementation Plans building on one another, incorporating new information and activities as new evidence emerges.

### **Outcome 1—Communities are safe and free from violence**

While Australia has criminal and civil laws to protect women and their children from violence, we must also act to prevent violence from happening in the first place.

Outcome 1 focuses on the critical role of individuals, families and communities in preventing violence against women. Everyone must accept a role in and the responsibility for ensuring that our society, particularly women and children, are safe and free from violence.

The Australian Government and State, Territory and Local Governments all need to provide leadership in building safe communities to ensure change is achieved and sustained.

To make communities safe and free from violence, the Plan of Action identifies five key strategies:

- 1.1 Focus on prevention
- 1.2 Strengthen community leadership, awareness and understanding
- 1.3 Promote positive male behaviours
- 1.4 Enhance women's economic independence
- 1.5 Build the evidence base.

### **Outcome 2—Relationships are respectful**

Respectful interpersonal relationships form the basis of a safe community. Understanding and practising respectful relationships is as important as the '3 Rs' (reading, writing and arithmetic) for creating a successful and harmonious society.

It is never too early to learn and acquire the relationships skills which influence every part of our lives. While these skills are usually learnt in the home, this is not always the case. They are also learnt in other settings such as at school, from peers, in the community and in faith-based and sporting organisations. They also need to be modelled and reinforced constantly outside these settings.

To create respectful relationships, the Plan of Action focuses on four key strategies:

- 2.1 Build the capacity for prevention education
- 2.2 Ensure all children participate in respectful relationships education
- 2.3 Support effective parenting
- 2.4 Build the evidence base.

### **Outcome 3—Services meet the needs of women and their children**

The effects of violence on women and their children inevitably create a need for services that are appropriate and accessible. A woman's first approach for help must be met with responsiveness and take account of individual differences and often complex needs.

Failure to respond quickly and effectively exacts a greater human, social and financial toll later on.

Short-term and long-term accommodation, health services, counselling, legal help and other services are needed.

The sector responsible for delivering these services already shows great flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness. The sector's workforce, however, needs strengthening. Adequate and sustained funding, as well as strategic workforce planning, is crucial to increasing workforce and infrastructure capacity.

To ensure services meet the needs of victims and survivors, the Plan of Action identifies four key strategies:

- 3.1 Strengthen service and workforce capacity
- 3.2 Increase access to safe accommodation
- 3.3 Undertake specific responses to ensure equitable access to services
- 3.4 Build the evidence base.

### **Outcome 4—Responses are just**

As long as sexual assault and domestic and family violence persist, Australia is obligated under national and international conventions to legislate against it; to prosecute breaches of laws; and to provide appropriate civil law responses that protect against further violence, and promote recovery and wellbeing.

While there have been strong improvements in these areas across governments, further improvement is needed. Australian women and their children have a right to protection from violence. Legal protection cannot be delivered if the laws are inadequate, if they are not applied in the way they were intended, if women experience re-victimisation in the justice process, or where the justice system is inaccessible or inequitable.

To deliver justice for women and children affected by violence, the Plan of Action identifies five key strategies:

- 4.1 Ensure accessible and equitable justice for women and their children
- 4.2 Ensure just civil remedies operate in parallel with criminal law and prioritise safety
- 4.3 Ensure excellence in legal responses to women and their children
- 4.4 Ensure judicial officers, law enforcement personnel and other professionals within the legal system have appropriate knowledge and expertise
- 4.5 Build the evidence base.

### **Outcome 5—Perpetrators stop their violence**

Perpetrators must be held accountable for their behaviour and must accept the consequences of their violence. While the formal justice system must make perpetrators accountable, it is essential that the most effective interventions are implemented to ensure that perpetrators change their attitudes and stop their violence.

Social attitudes that allow or even encourage the abuse of male power and control over women and their children must change, along with the violent behaviour linked to these attitudes.

As early as possible, perpetrators should participate in behaviour change programs, whether they self-refer, are directed to participate by the court, or are referred in other ways.

A range of programs for perpetrators on remand or serving custodial sentences is urgently needed. These programs must be complemented by careful pre-release planning, and supervision and post-release assistance. All perpetrator programs must respond to an individual's culture and context, and be evaluated for their effect on the perpetrator's future behaviour.

To ensure that perpetrators stop their violence, the Plan of Action identifies four key strategies:

- 5.1 Change behaviours through appropriate programs
- 5.2 Increase access to early intervention initiatives
- 5.3 Sustain behaviour change
- 5.4 Build the evidence base.

### **Outcome 6—Systems work together effectively**

Outcomes 1 to 5, will lead to little improvement unless government planning, policy, program, service and funding agencies (which are chronically fragmented at present) work collaboratively. Lack of coordination of government systems often leads to disappointing outcomes and can waste scarce resources.

To ensure that women and their children are safe and free from violence, policy and program development and service delivery must be well coordinated and seamless.

This means governments must design responses to violence against women from the viewpoint of those accessing services. New, effective approaches need to be developed, resourced and implemented quickly.

The following strategies are essential for improving government service delivery:

6.1 Ensure governments deliver what communities need

6.2 Coordinate responses

6.3 Build the evidence base.

For full details of the outcomes, strategies and 117 actions, and the proposed timing for their implementation, see *Time for Action: The National Council's Plan for Australia to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2009–2021* available at:

[http://www.ofw.fahcsia.gov.au/reducing\\_violence/national\\_plan/index.htm](http://www.ofw.fahcsia.gov.au/reducing_violence/national_plan/index.htm)